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Precarious Ageing: Questioning Access, Creating InterACTion

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Abstract This paper reflects on the relationship between financial precarity and old age, and the specific conditions that impact and influence digital access in these situations. In reflecting upon these matters we consider the overlapping barriers that inhibit digital learning in later life for seniors who live in situations of precarity. Our reflection on these issues draws on our experience with a participatory action research project, called InterACTion. InterACTion provides customized, individual and group digital literacy workshops in the common rooms of two subsidized housing complexes for low-income seniors in downtown Montreal. Drawing on the first year of the project we formulate seven lessons, or themes, learned that speak to the nuances of digital access: the need to situate one's methodology, questions of physical affordances, attentiveness to financial considerations, the role of language and literacies, the need for interpersonal considerations, the modulating force of precarious spaces of access, and the on-going need to co-create meaning and purpose together.

Keywords Access; Ageing; Digital Literacy; ICT; Precarity

1. Introduction

Some of the key critical questions in ICT studies are identifying who has access to what information resources, through what means, for what purposes in our current political and social context. In this paper, we relay work that has been conducted as part of our international research project on Ageing, Communication, Technologies (ACT).¹ We draw from our work deploying digital literacy workshops with older adults in low income buildings in Montréal to query the term ‘access’ in relation to ageing, and to articulate seven lessons about the multifaceted challenges to digital use for seniors living in conditions of poverty. We do so to contribute to a growing literature that addresses the systemic intellectual bias against including the experiences of the elderly within communication and media studies. Yet, in including age and ageing as significant, we want to avoid transforming age itself into a determining variable to account for the statistical under-representation of older adults in the landscape of ICT use.

When considering ICT and ageing, there are several intersecting societal trends in place in the context of Canada and elsewhere in the world: 1) a growth in the ageing population as boomer generations move into their 70s, 2) a move not only to a more digitized landscape populated by networked computers but of increasing growth in mobile and wireless services and a valorization of online exchanges and 3) the suggestion that there may be an increasing economic and social divide in our country and higher concentrations of wealth than ever before, including concentrations of pension wealth.² Further, according to a recent Statistics Canada report, “28% of Canadians aged 65 or over in the lowest income quartile used the Internet, compared with 95% of individuals aged 16 to 24 in households in the lowest income quartile,” indicating the need for research on these divisions in

¹ www.actproject.ca

² Poverty is on the rise among elders in Canada (OEDC, 2013) and it affects them unevenly, and is especially tied to gender. For instance, gaps in pension, wage gaps during working years, longer life expectancy and a higher chance of becoming widowed render women more vulnerable in their old age (Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2012). Further, immigrant populations are more likely to live in situations of poverty during their retirement age (Kaida and Boyd, 2011).

access in the context of the increasing concentration of corporate ownership and assets within an ever-expanding national telecommunication industry (Winseck, 2013).

To bring these mega-trends home, and to connect this data to the lives of people, we focus on a project, InterACTion that furnishes twice-monthly digital literacy workshops, inspired by participant action research approaches (Eubanks, 2011, Hearn et al, 2009), to a group of elders who are multiply marginalized within Canadian society. Participants include low-income residents, many with histories of addictions, who live in subsidized social housing in downtown Montreal. InterACTion attempts to shift the focus in ICT and communications to the lives and experiences of older adults, asking what ‘we’ have to learn about ICTs and new media from ‘them’.

InterACTion workshops were instigated in collaboration with the non-profit local organization Groupe Harmonie (GH).³ Created in 1983, GH works with seniors in Montreal (60 and over) who are dealing with addictions, including those to alcohol, drugs and gambling.

In April 2014, we jointly organized two “WiFi welcome parties” with elders residing in two different HLMs that provide affordable housing for seniors. HLM stands for *habitations à loyer modique*, which is subsidized housing. The two HLMs that hosted the InterACTion project are located in Montreal’s downtown core. The intention of the parties was to introduce residents to the new router that GH had installed in their common room, and to show both the router –and what the Internet might do—to the residents. Following this, with GH leading the way, we conducted a door-to-door survey in these two locations, which yielded some thirty respondents. Finally, at time of writing we have given fourteen monthly workshops in each building, for a total of twenty-eight workshops.

Since the beginning of the project, over seventy elders have partaken in the workshops. A slight majority of the participants are women and most prefer to express themselves in French rather

³ Their website can be accessed at www.groupeharmonie.org

than English. As HLMs are meant to house adults 60 and over who are living later life in a state of poverty, the workshop participants are thus generally understood to be living with less than \$27,500 annually per household (OMHM, 2015). There are about five residents who regularly attend (meaning on a regular monthly basis) and there are, on average, six residents per workshop. Thus far, thirteen students from Concordia University and the Université de Montréal have been involved, along with five members of GH, as well as an administrator from Concordia University who assists with community liaison.

As the name suggests, the overarching goal of InterACTion is to create a convivial and intergenerational environment for elders to learn how to use digital technologies and to promote interactions among the HLM residents who can often be marginalized from the broader community. Attention to the location for learning about technologies is a necessity in a situation where people 60 and over are living together in small individual apartment units out of necessity, and not necessarily out of choice.

For the purposes of this paper, we tell a story: one that focuses on the methodological considerations connected to our experience as researchers working in this very particular context and the seven lessons learned through fourteen months of collaboration with GH and the residents they serve. Each of these lessons contributes to drawing a picture of the intricacies and challenges of digital access, with an understanding of the so-called “digital divide” that takes into account not just the availability of connectivity but also varying levels of use and skills among certain populations (Hargittai, 2002; Van Dijk, 2006), and an understanding of access as multi-layered and as accounting for a number of interrelated conditions, including social ones (Clement & Shade, 2000).

2. Lessons

2.1. Lesson 1: Situated Methodologies

When we organized welcome parties in the common rooms of both HLMs in April of 2014 we had hopes of meeting residents, explaining the project to them, asking them about their interests, showing them an array of laptops and tablet computers we had brought, and instigating them into participating in future workshops. While we ate, socialized, danced to YouTube videos *they* found, demoed software, showed how to use search engines, and explained the world of apps at the welcome, some residents went back to their rooms and got their laptops and began to ask for help troubleshooting specific problems. We quickly noticed that seniors seemed more excited about using the tablets and exhibited less curiosity about the laptops at this event. This initial reaction, combined with a general societal enthusiasm towards the adoption of mobile tablet computers, led us to speculate that they would serve as a preferred and more affordable means of technological engagement in the workshops. Similarly, there has been research that points to the potentially high acceptance and satisfaction rate of seniors learning with tablets (Werner & Werner, 2012; Burkhard & Koch, 2012) and to the potential for tablets to increase digital inclusion (Tsai et al., 2015). This seemed to be the lesson of the WIFI welcome; the tablets were initially objects of curiosity, and several seniors were excited by the prospect of engaging with them learning how to use them.

As a follow-up to this initial encounter, we developed a short bilingual survey to learn more about the interests of the residents, their wishes in relation to learning and using digital technologies, and their current computer-related skills. We also asked what technologies and equipment they had on hand. Surveys always take place in a context: given the low level of access to both devices and networked services, an on-line survey would have been impossible. We quickly realized that a door-to-door survey would be the only option. Yet even this proved to be a challenge. In this situation of social housing where people rely on government subsidies and are often under the scrutiny of governmental agents and agencies looking to cut their benefits, people are suspicious

and mistrustful of surveillance. As a result, residents often did not answer the door, and when they did they were reluctant to share identifying information. But when people did answer the door and agreed to the survey, there were conversely several instances when the desire for interpersonal contact was strong: a short survey that would normally call for about five minutes often took over forty minutes, and we often had to fill it out with the respondents. The thirty people who did answer indicated that there was a high level of interest in free workshops and that, if the community rooms could be opened for this purpose, they would be used.

The survey also outlined future challenges: the majority of respondents were self-assessed beginners or had “average” level of skills. When we asked what they would like to learn they suggested the some of the basics of Internet searches as well as email, Skype, photo scanning, Facebook and YouTube. We also noted that this was the question that had been the most often skipped by the respondents: “what would you like to learn”. In fact, nearly a third of them had opted not to answer, often unable to point exactly to what they wanted. A large majority, 84%, thought that learning more about digital technologies would have an impact on their lives with some 44 % indicating that they thought that this impact could be “big”. Yet this assessment of potential impact was speculative, for the majority of our participants cannot afford to keep up with technology, had never used a digital device for a sustained period of time in their working or personal lives and could not afford access to an internet service provider or a cell phone.

2.2. Lesson 2: Physical Affordances

Given our observations at the WIFI welcome party, we initially expected tablets to be more popular. Yet within the first few workshops, it became clear that many of the seniors found it easier to work with laptops. Despite general enthusiasm for their newness, tablets often need to be carried or held for long periods by the user during use, and touchscreen technology relies on the

fluid and well-controlled finger movements of a user. The difficulties encountered by seniors while using the tablets were in-line with those relayed by Neve et al. (2015), in that motor and dexterity problems served as principal “demotivators” to the use of tablets. Indeed, the swiping motion needed for tablet use was foreign to many residents and, for some, impaired hearing, vision and trouble with fine motor skills became important factors in selecting specific devices. For these participants, the keyboard and screen of the laptops provided them with better affordances. In fact, many of the women, in particular, commented that they were more comfortable with keyboards because of their previously acquired typing skills, which they had developed through a gender-based formal education and work experience. This skillset served as an entry-point, bolstering confidence in their ability to use the technologies. In this instance, while it may have initially seemed as if the design of the tablets offered better affordances, for some of our participants their histories of prior computer use and their embodied subjectivity influenced their choice of device, a point on the importance of embodiment in computer learning supported by the research of Buse (2010).

2.3. Lesson 3: Financial considerations

There is an interesting paradox here between physical affordances and financial affordance. Despite the participants’ discomfort and reluctance in using tablets, and their use of computers at the workshops, it seems that those planning to purchase equipment are considering buying Android tablets because of their relatively lower cost. And here it is necessary to consider a technology not as a black box, but as a device for networked connection.

While there is a WiFi connection in the common rooms, most residents do not have Internet access in their own units and cannot afford it seeing as the average cost in Canada is extremely high, approximately \$75 a month, and it goes up incrementally every year and can require a credit card or a credit check. Without a sustained connection in their own apartments, the participants see

little reason to own either a laptop or tablet. Yet the desire to be a part of a networked society is present, even if they cannot necessarily afford it. In one instance, a participant who is using the workshops to write her memoirs on a computer laptop does not need Internet access for the purposes of her project. Yet, she still wants connectivity, explaining this is “because I am missing out on so much.” Likewise, because of limited funds, she has decided a tablet is a better option for her because of cost, even though she prefers typing on a laptop.

Through this and other conversations with these elders, it has become clear that they imagine themselves wandering the city with tablets surfing the internet in a park or going to a coffee shop to be a part of a larger cultural scenario of anywhere, anytime connectivity. However, for most of these residents the reality of ownership and unfettered connectivity is quite different: it is mitigated not only by the affordances of the device, but by their ability to quite literally afford to stay connected (see Sawchuk and Crow, 2012).

2.4. Lesson 4: Language and literacies

There are other factors of exclusions linked to socio-economic class that influence the ability of our participants to interact with these devices. Illiteracy is particularly high amongst the elderly and lower levels of literacy (along with lower levels education and income) have been identified as correlated with non-use of ICTs (Veenhof, Sciadas & Clermont, 2005). This is a consideration that needs to be included in an examination of the conditions of access of an older and impoverished population. A number of the residents who participate in our workshops, have a relatively low level of literacy that impacts their ability to use the internet, and especially to conduct searches.⁴

⁴ Canadian data from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey reveals that only 18% of respondents over 65 were situated at a literacy level of 3 or above—level 3 being “the desired threshold for coping well in a complex knowledge society” (Statistic Canada, 2003). A large majority (82%) of Canadian elders have been deemed to have general literacy challenges. Canada has significant gaps between levels of general literacy, and has a notably “higher proportion of its population at the highest and lowest levels”

With years of Internet use, one also builds a verbal and visual lexicon to facilitate software use. For instance, even simple web searches rely on decoding expressions like “quick search,” “I’m feeling lucky,” and icons like drop-down arrows, hour and magnifying glasses and spinning beach balls all have a symbolic value that is learned progressively by users, and comes to be taken for granted. The perceived work required to acquire this lexicon can feel like a daunting task for beginners, as we found in our workshops. Everything needs to be explained and sometimes translated. As most participants are Francophone, they immediately found themselves with the need to customize language settings, as many are ill at ease with the default English configuration of software. This was also the case for several seniors who had visual impairments, and who were burdened by dim screens and unable to read the small characters. In these cases, device and software settings needed to be altered. Customization requires a level of proficiency beyond that afforded by a beginner.

2.5. Lesson 5: Interpersonal considerations

There are libraries and community centres near the two HLMs providing WiFi access, public computers, and affordable workshops on a regular basis. Although we found that these seniors were aware of these devices and publicly available services, our participants remained reluctant to make use of them. They are trapped in a double bind. On one hand they were unprepared to use the technologies alone, did not have access to them in their rooms, nor did they have anyone to turn to in their immediate environment. On the other, they were unwilling to reveal their precarity, alienation and isolation in a public setting. One of the participants noted that he did not want to frequent local libraries because of a fear of contracting bed bugs (a problem that was rampant in several units of the HLM in which he lived, and indeed an issue that created worry and exacerbated isolation among some

(Statistics Canada, 2012b) thus emphasizing the need to consider general literacy as an important marker of social inequality in the country.

residents). Conversely, the one-on-one setting of the InterACTION workshops for these participants broke through the barrier of personal reluctance by favouring an approach based on establishing a rapport between participants. By emphasizing a bi-directional sharing of knowledge and stories, our students and other “tech-mentors” became surrogates for what Maria Bakardjieva (2005, 2011) calls ‘warm experts,’ or “a close friend or relative who possesses relatively advanced knowledge of computer networks and personal familiarity with the novice user’s situation and interests” (2011, p. 74). Interestingly, we also noticed that a lot of the seniors who made use of the workshops, especially those who approached us with specific troubleshooting questions, had no or few relatives living nearby who would be able or likely to provide them with the help they wanted.

2.6. Lesson 6: Precarious spaces of access

Throughout the workshops, we observed a need to recognize the connections between precarious living situations and access to technologies. Despite the fact that WiFi had been made available in the common room, we realized that the socio-economical realities of the residents had an impact on the uses of this common space, what we imagined as their potential digital commons. While there may be connectivity in the common rooms, there were in fact few opportunities for the residents to frequent the space and to use Internet access to reinforce their learning. Over the years, the use of the common room has been an instigator of conflict among the residents, some of whom are grasping with physical and psychological impairments, and, again, who are not all co-habiting *by choice*. The common space is locked unless GH is physically present in the building to prevent both conflict and theft. In addition, because of the lack of funding to the maintenance of the building, no one is currently employed to clean the common room, which also limits use. Keeping the room locked has become a cost-efficient alternative to finding adequate staff or volunteers to do rudimentary maintenance. Because of these circumstances, a bench located outside of the locked common room has become an important and impromptu point of access in

one of the HLMs, as the wireless network is still accessible from there and the bench itself has no history of contestation.

2.7. Lesson 7: Meaning and purposes

We found that one of the key elements that determined *return* participation was finding a *reason* to use the Internet and to thus imbue the sessions with meaning. These were often very personal in nature. For instance, one woman who intermittently attends found exercises that could improve her back pain, and learned to look them up on YouTube videos. As she does not own a computer, she took notes from these sessions on paper to bring back up to her unit. The participants tended to forgo an interest in learning that would require sustained use or daily management (such as email) or use that demanded privacy (such as Skype). As such, the workshops became focused on acquiring information and viewing online materials that would not conflict with these concerns. As they perceptively pointed out to us “why would I get an email address, if I can only look up my emails once a month?”. This left residents in a less-than-ideal learning situation, as they had a general inability to have sustained access to the WiFi signal and equipment, and were sometimes unable to practice their skills between the monthly workshops.

But some residents found resilient and creative workarounds. Some began to carefully think about topics they wanted to look up and learn in the intervals between workshops. Others began conversations amongst themselves in the preceding weeks in preparation for the workshop. Many, in fact, now come with a list (written or otherwise) of things they specifically want to do during sessions.⁵

⁵ For example, two participants are working together to make lists of old buildings in the Montreal downtown area that have been important places in their lives, such as hospitals, schools, churches, parks and restaurants. They began using the monthly sessions as dedicated time to work on what they termed as “their project” of searching through city archives to find information and photos. During the workshop, they used these Internet results as prompts to tell stories about their childhood and how their lives in Montreal have overlapped. They also now use Google Maps to travel through contemporary Montreal streets.

3. Conclusion


From the momentary ephemerality of the WIFI welcome, to the door-to-door survey to our sustained and on-going encounter with the participants in InteACTion, it is evident that uneven access to wealth has its tributary effects. It not only creates precarious and often difficult living situations for our InterACTion participants; it entails a host of interconnected material barriers to the uses and learning of technologies that require troubleshooting and innovative workarounds.

In the current neo-liberal context many of the documents we read from industry are geared towards exploiting the untapped seniors market and promoting a language of innovation that makes it seem as if all have unfettered access to perpetual connectivity in a networked society. This focus does not take into account the still very large percentage of elders in “developed worlds”, such as those living in social housing in Montreal, who are not living in the top twenty percentile. In this context, the realities of poorer seniors are neglected experiences from the purview of a pure marketing mentality towards ICTs, which is typically interested in the lives of affluent seniors who have “aged successfully.”

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